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ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-103028>

Published Research Report

Published Version

Originally published at:

Fux, Peter; Walser, Christoph; Tshering, Namgyel (2014). Archaeology in the kingdom of Buthan: Exploring the country's prehistory. Zürich: Schweizerisch-Liechtensteinische Stiftung für archäologische Forschungen im Ausland.

Archaeology in the Kingdom of Bhutan: Exploring the Country's Prehistory

Peter Fux¹, Christoph Walser², Namgyel Tshering³

Abstract

By today, archaeological insight into the cultural history of the Kingdom of Bhutan in the eastern Himalayas is still lacking. In the course of the ongoing Bhutan-Swiss collaboration project in order to institutionalize archaeology, not only highly important sites were detected but also the exigency of archaeological regulations and site protection becomes evident.

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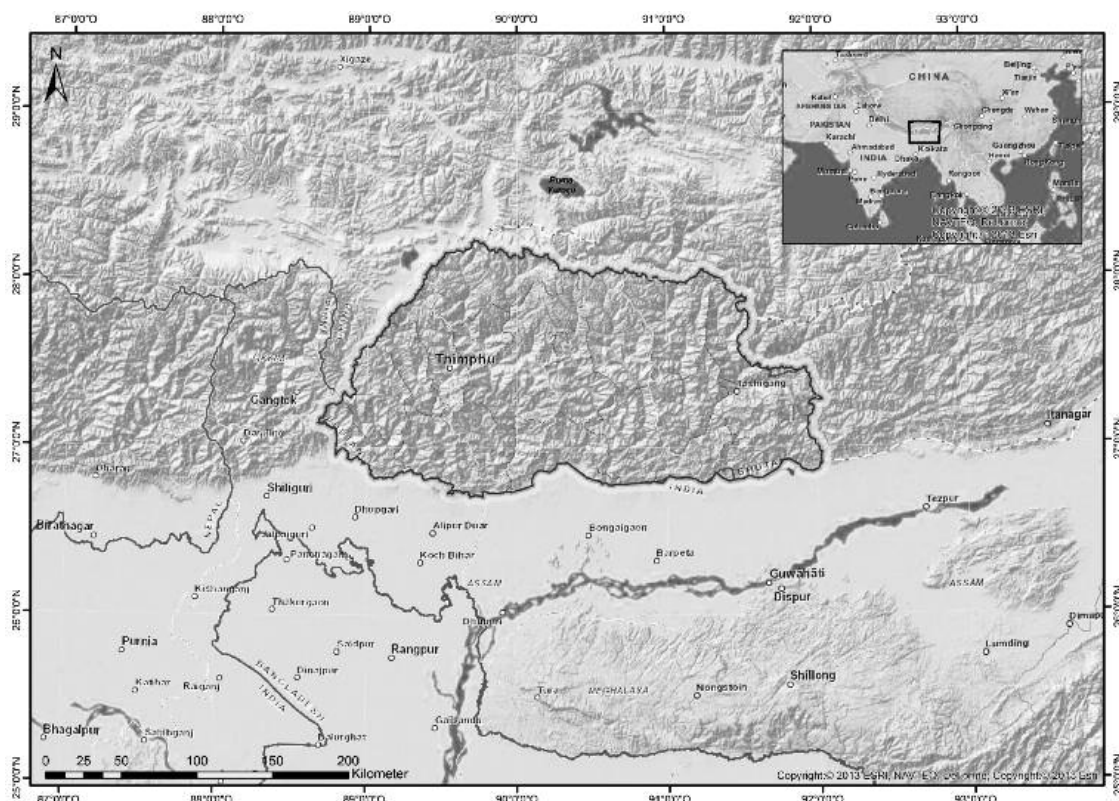
² Universities of Bamberg and Zurich.

³ Helvetas, Swiss Intercooperation, Thimphu, Bhutan.

Fig. 1 Map of Bhutan (Data source: © ESRI 2013; <http://www.gadm.org>)

Brief geography of Bhutan

The Kingdom of Bhutan in the eastern Himalayas, situated between India in the south and Tibet (China) in the north, covers an area of approx. 38.000 km² (Fig. 1). In the north,



the highest peaks reach an altitude of more than 7.500 m.a.s.l. In the south, the foothills descend into the subtropical Duars Plain, only about 200 m.a.s.l.

Bhutan's first parliamentary elections were induced by the Fourth King, His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuck, in 2008. Television and internet were kept at bay until 1999.⁴ Before 1981, a total of 7.800 tourists visited the country, and 6.392 were counted in 2001.⁵ Since 2012, however, approximately 100.000 tourists per year have been expected. Along with this tremendous rush of tourism and cultural exchange, building constructions – mainly hotels – are increasing rapidly and endanger archaeological sites, if unrecognized or disregarded.

Furthermore, it has to be pointed out that Bhutan holds an exceptional position in the Buddhist Himalayan cultural landscape. Whereas Mongolia was affected by the Russian, and Tibet by the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Sikkim and Ladakh have been part of the Indian state for a long time. The Kingdom of Bhutan, however, right at the beginning of facing extensive international impacts, keeps exceptionally vital and pristine historic traditions and myths alive. For this reason, Bhutan is of great importance to the study of Buddhism and cultural history in the Himalayas. For archaeologists, religious knowledge and historical myths provide unique research opportunities. Therefore, archaeological research and protection are urgent desiderata for this cultural gemstone in the Himalayas.

Gurus and Hidden Treasures – History in Bhutan

According to myths and oral history, Bhutan entered the historic period not earlier than in the mid-seventh century AD with the foundation of two Buddhist temples, Kyerchu Lhakang in the Paro Valley in the west and Jampa Lhakang in the Choekhor Valley, Bumthang district. It is said that the two buildings belonged to the 108 temples built by Sangtsen Gampo (c. 605–650 AD), the 32nd King of the Yarlung dynasty of Tibet, and his Nepali and Chinese queens. The temples subdued the supine demoness on which Tibet was founded.⁶

Later on, during the eighth century, as tremendous translation efforts of Chinese and Indic Buddhist literature were forced by the Tibetan King,⁷ Padmasambhava, known as the precious teacher Guru Rinpoche and nowadays considered as the country's patron saint, arrived in Bhutan and successfully taught and spread Buddhism. As the Bhutanese historian Karma Phuntsho convincingly explains, the challenging discrepancy between a traditional Buddhist comprehension of history and the Western way of exploring the past now becomes illustrative. Whereas in Western historiography events and concrete personalities are fixed on and adhered to a linear timeline, Padmasambhava shows us the contrary. In an anachronistic way, he appears in different forms in very different times and spaces and is able to leave footprints in stones and to hold texts in a time warp for their rediscovery centuries later.⁸ Thus, «he is not merely a historical person but an enlightened energy or state of being.»⁹

What is known about Padmasambhava, however, is conveyed by hagiographies and other texts, considered as treasure texts from the eighth century and found by so-called *tertöns* or treasure-discoverers, mainly in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. Probably the most popular Bhutanese *tertön*, Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), accompanied the authors of this article during their Tang Valley survey (discussed further below).

Pioneering Archaeology in Bhutan

In 2005, Bhutan's former Prime Minister expressed to Helvetas the wish to initiate archaeological projects in Bhutan and the request to receive further support. Furthermore, it has to be mentioned that it is His Majesty, the fourth King of Bhutan's personal wish to initiate archaeological projects in the country. By invitation of Helvetas, the Swiss-Liechtenstein Foundation of Archaeological Research Abroad (SLSA) organized preliminary inquiries and clarifications in 2006.¹⁰ Consequently, the Bhutan-Swiss

⁴ Karma Phuntsho 2013, p. 585.

⁵ Karma Phuntsho 2013, p. 585.

⁶ Karma Phuntsho 2013, pp. 76–84.

⁷ Kapstein 2006, p. 72.

⁸ Karma Phuntsho 2013, pp. 84–110.

⁹ Karma Phuntsho 2013, p. 84/85.

¹⁰ See Fischer 2006.

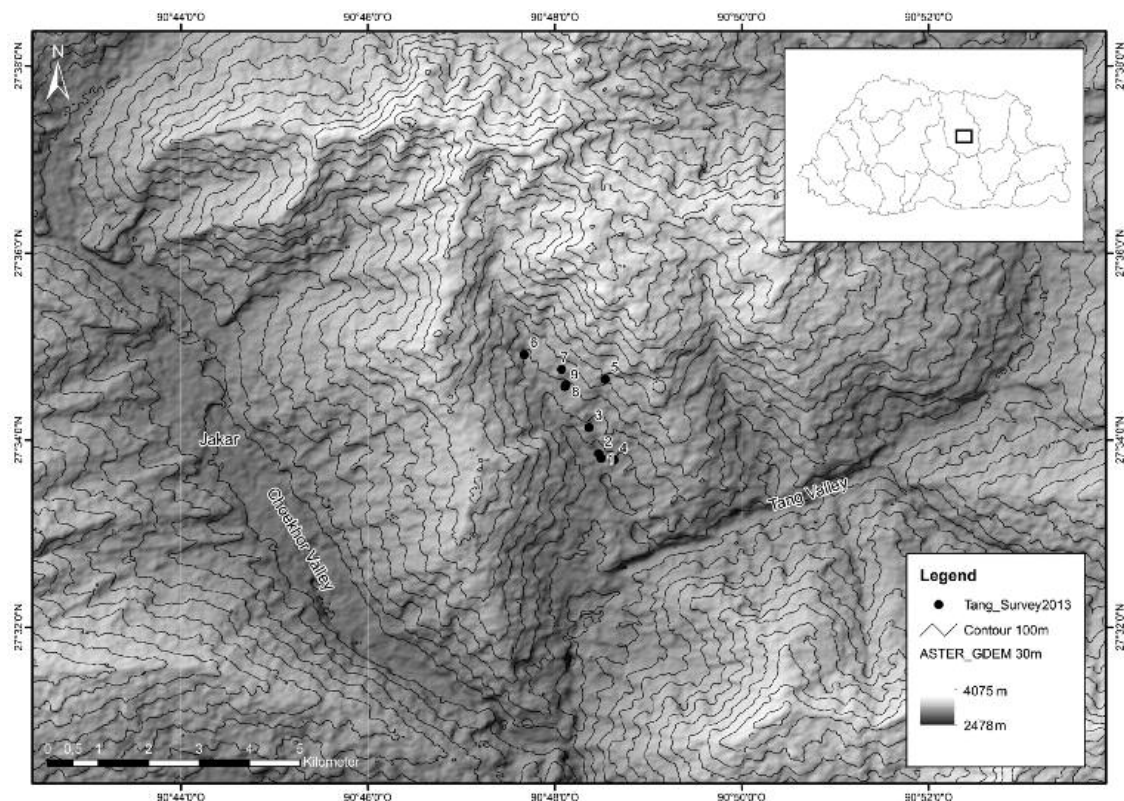


Fig. 2 Survey Map of the Tang Valley (Data source: ASTER GDEM – «ASTER is a product of METI and NASA»; <http://www.gadm.org>)

Fig. 3 Site No 1 «Challakhang»



3

Archaeology Project, a cooperation to institutionalize archaeology, was set up between the Kingdom of Bhutan, Helvetas, and SLISA.

During the first three year project term (2008–2010), the historically important Drapham Dzong fortification ruin in the Jakhar Valley, Bumthang district, was excavated.¹¹ The second phase (2011–2013) was focused on capacity building in the field of archaeology and its institutionalization. In cooperation with the University of Zurich, a modular teaching program was elaborated. Cultural officers from several district administrations, university lecturers, architects and employees of the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs were taught in numerous aspects of archaeology by means of classroom teaching and practical fieldwork, including a rescue excavation and site inventories.¹² As a first and very important result, the Royal Government of Bhutan is currently establishing an Archaeology Section under the Division for Conservation of Heritage Sites of the Department of Culture.

Oral History and Field Survey in the Tang Valley, Bumthang

In the context of the Bhutan-Swiss Archaeology Project, the authors conducted a field survey in the Tang Valley in October 2013 (Fig. 2). The Gup (county officer) of Tang, Mr. Thinley Namgyel, put the authors in contact with Mr. Kencho Tsheltrem from Kunzang Drak, a former monk of the Tamshing monastery and school teacher, locally admitted as literate adept of local history. Together with Mr. Kencho Tsheltrem, the authors visited and documented the sites discussed below and interviewed local people. Even though this information may differ from other historical sources, it documents the current state of knowledge of the local society.

No 1³: Challakhang (N 27,56346°; E 90,80827°; Alt. 2723 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

At the beginning of a north-south oriented hill ridge, a few meters above the valley, a small *chorten* was built. Besides the *chorten*, a flat round stone (approx. 1.5 m in diameter) is located (Fig. 3). The name Challakhang refers to the village, the name of the site is Kakaling, and the stone is called Simbu golang, or the demon's Golang.

¹¹ See Meyer 2010.

¹² Della Casa, Fux, Mäder 2011; Della Casa, Fux, Diggelmann, Walser 2012.

¹³ The numbering of the survey sites corresponds with the numbering of the map.

According to the oral legend, a human eating demon housed at this site. It was Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) who then destroyed the demon who cooked human beings on this particular stone. Then, the chorten was built at the site. It is said that *chortens* are often erected on sites where demons once lived.

No 2: Palingtakpa (N 27,56427°; E 90,80782°; Alt. 2773 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

Approximately 50 m further up the densely overgrown hill, a thin, approximately 50 cm long stone stele is located (Fig. 4). Adjacent, a small *chorten* was recently built. The authors are informed that it was Pema Lingpa's place of meditation in 1476. Nowadays, the serpent god is adorned at this place.

According to the amount of stones lying around, the whole hill ridge was once overbuilt. However, local people removed stones for their own construction purposes.

No 3: Gomba Pema Ling (main tower, so-called *utse*: N 27,56894°; E 90,80609°; Alt. 2891 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

Along the most upper part of the north-south oriented hill a large elongated fortification ruin is located in the dense forest. Parts of the stone walls are still up to six meters high but are most likely to collapse within the near future (Fig. 5). The main tower, the so-called *Utse*, in the extreme north, has the ground dimension of seven by seven meters. An outer bailey seems to be situated in a lower position in the south, comparable to the Drapham Dzong ruin in the Choekhor Valley.¹⁴ The elongated shape along a hill ridge, however, recalls the Yushingte Dzong in the Choekhor Valley, mapped in 2012.¹⁵

The authors are told that this was Pema Lingpa's birthplace. He was born in the year of the Iron Horse, on the fifteenth day of the eleventh month. His mother was Pema Seldon, the father's name was Gelwa Dhendup.

Fig.4 Site No 2 «Palingtakpa»

Fig.5 Site No 3 «Gomba Pema Ling»



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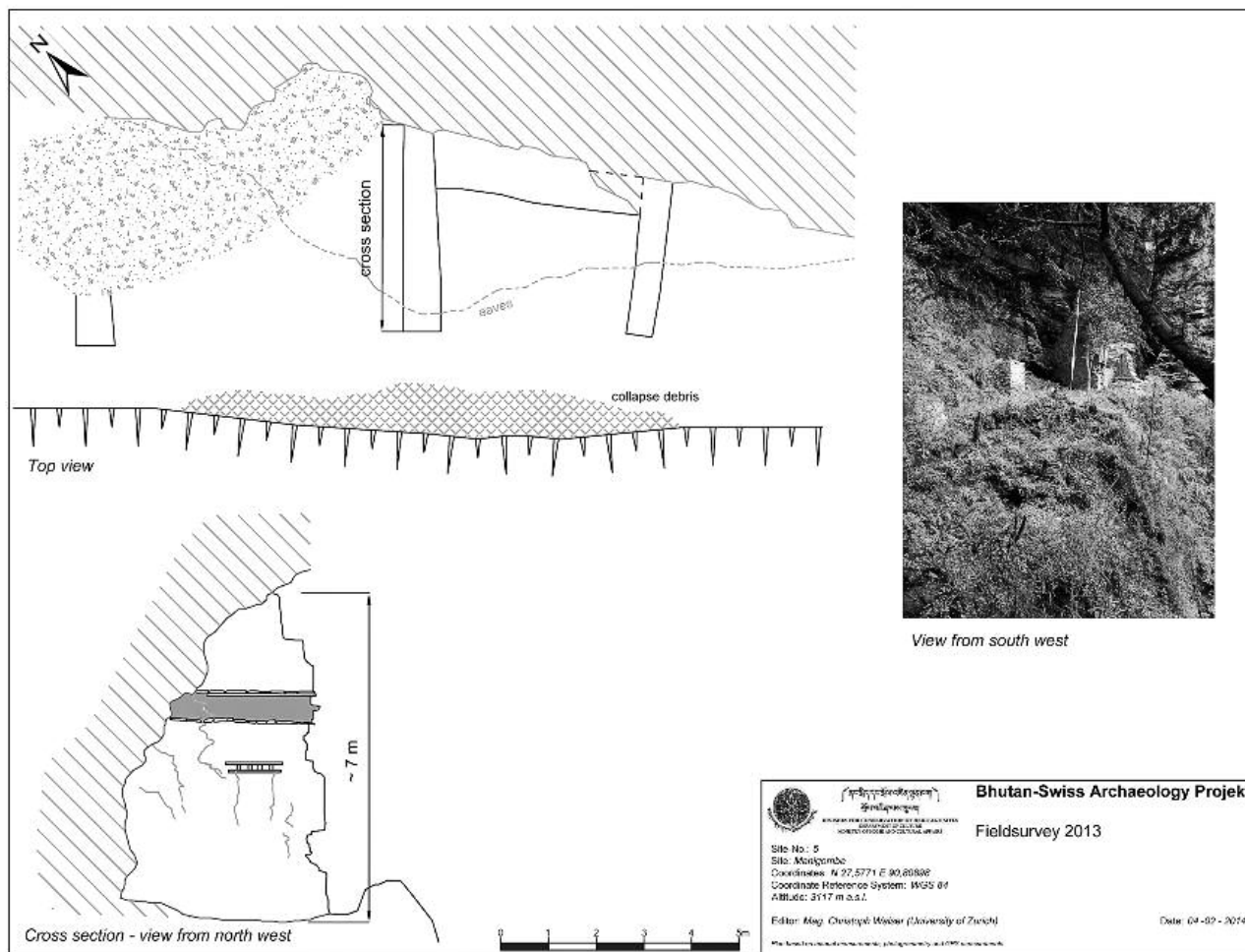
No 4: Zhongmai (N 27,56315°; E 90,81051°; Alt. 2781 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

According to the authors' informant, a ruin was recently situated on the adjacent hill top, but local people removed the stones for construction purposes. In the dense vegetation building, structures are hardly visible nowadays.

It is said that Pema Lingpa's ox, which was stolen by the local farmers and was not returned even when he requested them to do so, was kept at this site. Hereupon, the local deity transformed the ox into stone. It is alleged that the petrified ox was still visible approximately fifty years ago, but it is now overgrown by the dense vegetation.

¹⁴ See Meyer 2010; Grün et al. 2009.

¹⁵ See Della Casa, Fux, Diggelmann, Walser 2012, pp. 156–157.



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Fig. 6 Plan of Site No 5 «Manigomba»

Fig. 7 Site No 5 «Guru Rinpoche's throne»



7

No 5: Manigomba and the ruin nearby (N 27,57751°; E 90,80898°; Alt. 3117 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

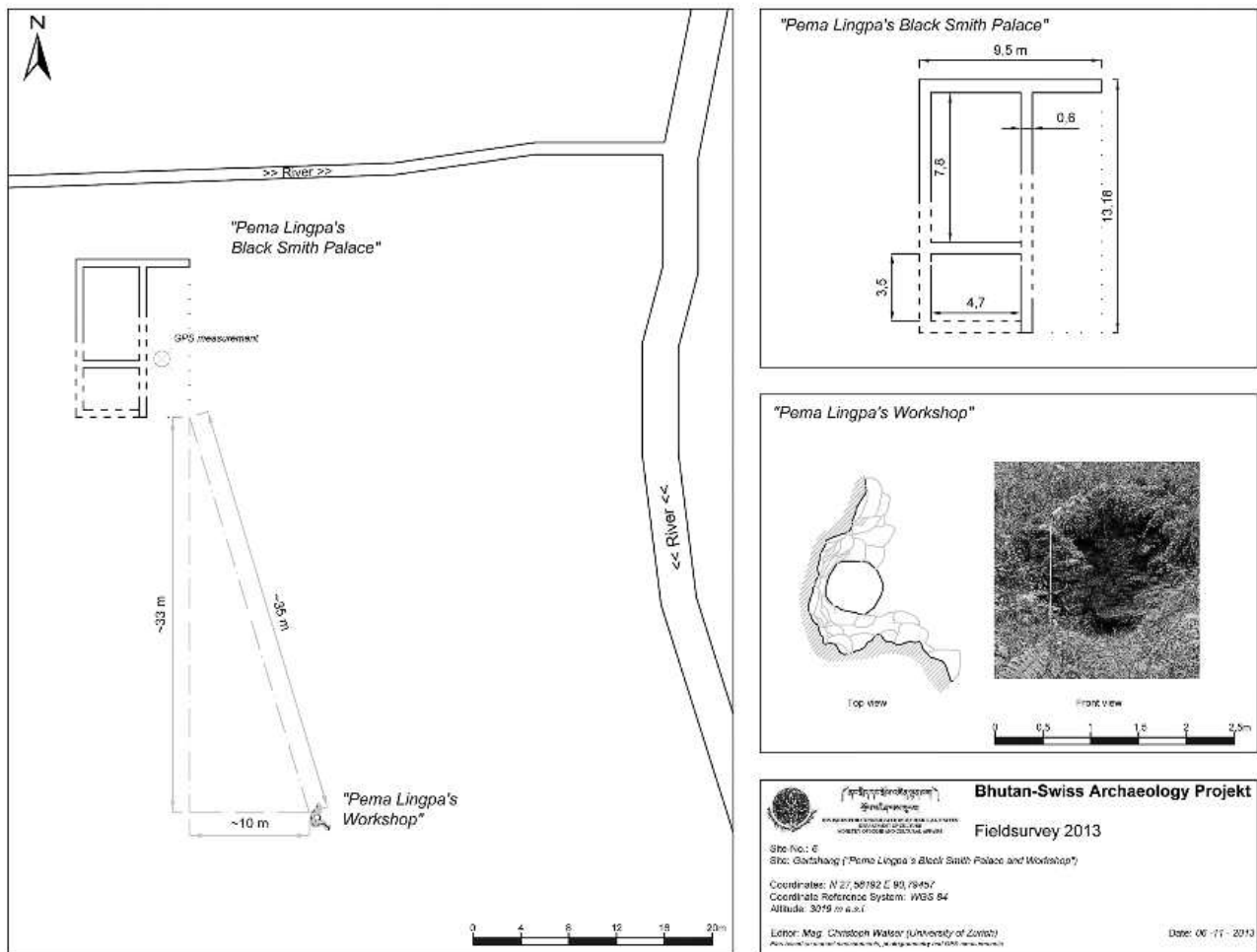
A multistoried stone building is located underneath a rock shelter next to a waterfall (Fig. 6). In the plastered walls, several wooden constructions, e.g. lintels, are well preserved. This site offers a breathtaking prospect of the lower valley. On the opposite hill ridge, approximately thirty meters further south and on the other side of the waterfall, some building remains and a 'throne-like' simple stone construction are documented. The latter is still adored, as some banknotes indicate.

Supposedly, the building belonged to Lam Choying, the husband of Pema Lingpa's aunt, and the stone construction was Guru Rinpoche's (Padmasambhava) throne (Fig. 7). Here, Pema Lingpa was taught and blessed by Guru Rinpoche (note the time difference of the two lifetimes). Guru Rinpoche handed over a script which authorized Pema Lingpa to search for treasures. Subsequently, Pema Lingpa recovered a textbook from the lake *Nari Drak*, later called burning lake, from which he then taught his followers.

No 6: Gartshang (N 27,58192°; E 90,79457°; Alt. 3019 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

In the dense forest on a terrace above the creek, some large remains of clay walls are preserved up to a height of approximately three meters (Fig. 8). The floor space of this building amounts to approximately 12.5 by 8.5 meters. At the edge above the creek, a stove-shaped stone construction is located. Some stones seem to be slagged.

After having left behind his life as a shepherd, Pema Lingpa became a blacksmith and built his shop here. It is said that in Tamshing an iron chain, which was manufactured by Pema Lingpa at this place, is still preserved.



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According to the informant, local farmers still collect iron slag pieces as devotional objects. Furthermore, there was a cave, Choshey Drak, above Gartshang, where Pema Lingpa taught his people.

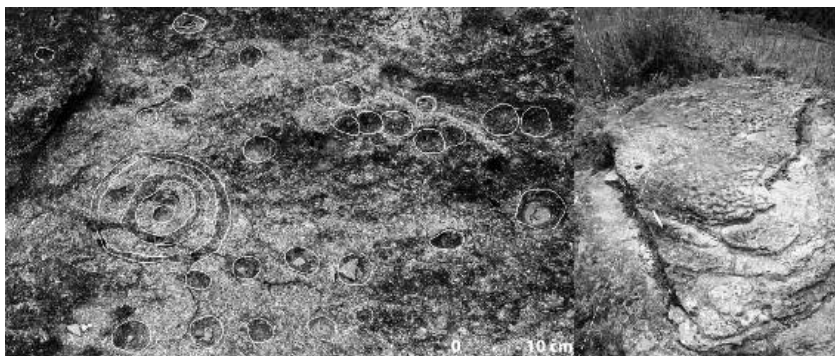
Fig. 8 Plan of Site No 6 «Gartshang»

Fig. 9 Site No 7 «Petroglyphs with cup and ring marks»

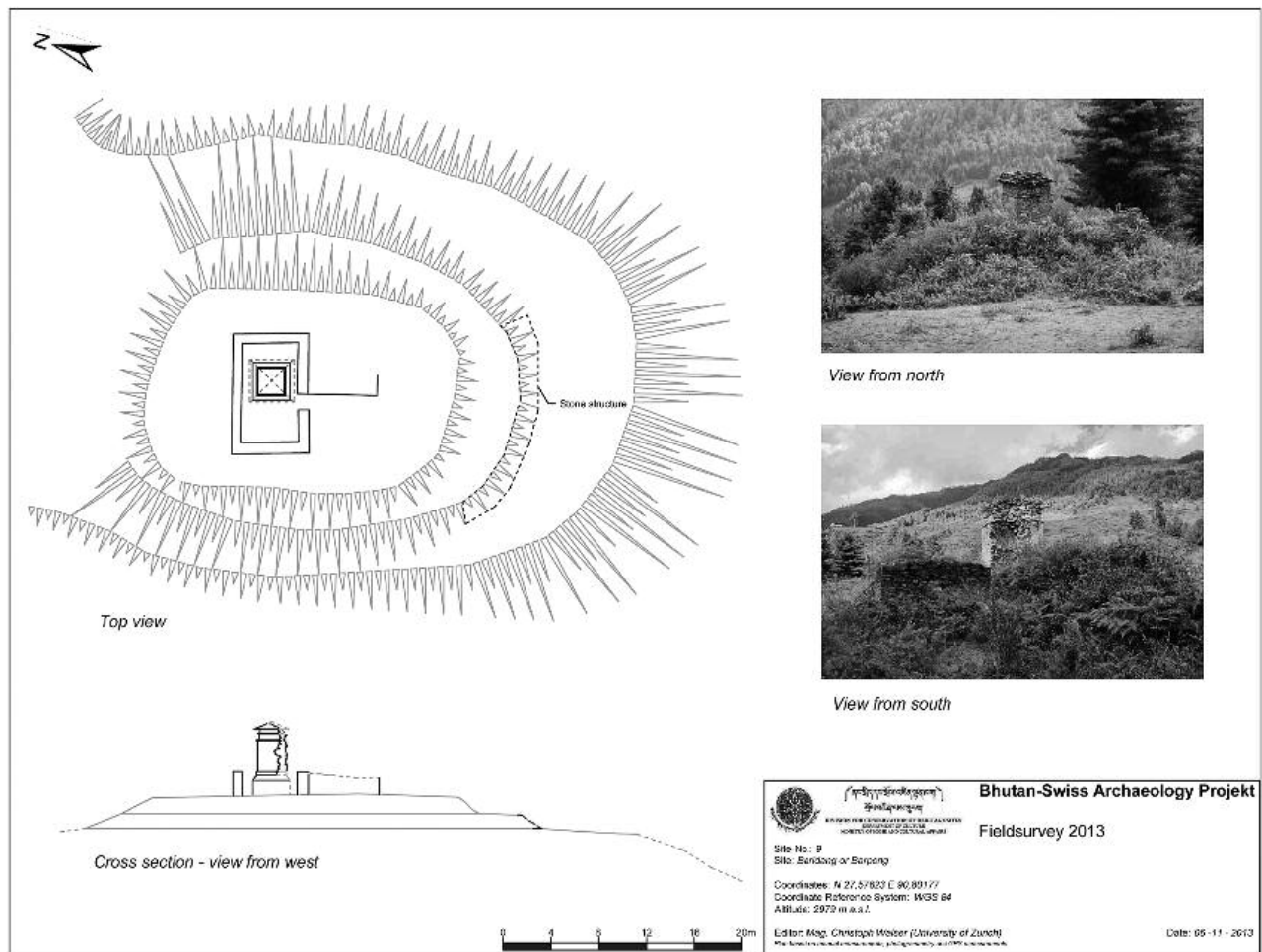
No 7/8: Petroglyphs, cup and ring marks (large rock: N 27,57927°; E 90,80122°; Alt. 3055 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84. Several rocks, spread in the open grassland: N 27,57655°; E 90,80199°; Alt. 2978 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

In the open grassland above the valley and near Pema Lingpa's *chorten* (see below), several large rocks with artificial cup and ring marks were detected (Fig. 9). Up to 30 cm deep cup holes in mostly flat rocks are partially connected with shallow trenches. Several concentric dot-circle structures were also documented.

It is said that Pema Lingpa's mother was cremated here. The rocks served as his playground during his time as a shepherd.



9



10

Fig. 10 Plan of Site No 9 «Baridong or Barpong»

No 9: Baridang or Barpong (N 27,57623°; E 90,80177°; Alt. 2979 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)
 The approximately 5.5 m high *chorten* was built on an artificial mound, located on a striking hill ridge in an open grassland above the valley ground (Fig. 10). In the outer areas of the mound, clearly artificial stone accumulations are visible. The wooden roof construction of the *chorten* is still partially preserved. The *chorten* itself is surrounded by a rectangular wall construction with dimensions of 5.2 by 10.5 meters. The entrance is located in the south-east. More recently, the *chorten* was abrasively destroyed and opened on its southern part. The authors are informed that the *chorten* was built by Pema Lingpa.

Tang Valley – Survey Conclusion: Treasure Discoverers and Treasure Hunters

The first archaeological survey in one of Bhutan's historical core regions clearly indicates that this extraordinarily rich cultural landscape actively lives on myths and oral history. Local people are deeply rooted in their world view and religious scenery with its meaningful places, traces and relicts. Although it was not possible to further examine the discovered sites or to determine the exact age of structures within this time-limited survey, the authors were able to clearly recognize a discrepancy between the lively Buddhist history and the western, chronological concept of history. The cultural relicts referred to Pema Lingpa and Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) seem to have quite different ages. Following the initial assessment of *Gomba Pema Ling*, *Manigomba* and *Gartshang* for example, neither their construction techniques nor their state of conservation indicate a rough contemporaneity. Nonetheless, a clear dating of the structures on the basis of e.g. radiocarbon dating would be desirable. Together with *Zhongmai*, the stories pertaining to these sites seem to illustrate how cultural remains

from different times took on a new meaning in the course of Buddhistization of the Himalayan regions. Another example worth mentioning in this context is the stone slab at *Challakhang*. Thinking of prehistoric structures from Europe or South America, one might get the impression that, according to the topographic situation, a stone plate taken from pre-Buddhist remains was displaced and later overwritten with a new mythical story. Furthermore, the authors have been informed that *chortens* are traditionally built at spots where ‘demons’ used to live. The stele at *Palingtakpa*, only a few meters further up the hill ridge, might be a reutilization of a much older cultural relict, too, as it is the stone slab of Guru Rinpoche’s throne at *Manigomba*. This might lead to the question if the *tertön* Pema Lingpa, for example, was also a treasure-discoverer in an ambiguous sense, maybe able to reframe cultural relicts?

The petroglyph rocks covered with cup and ring marks most probably were part of a prehistoric ritual place, including the artificial mound of *Baridong*. In the neighboring Choekhor Valley, at *Kenchosum*, similar petroglyphs were documented in 2012, and in their vicinity prehistoric burial mounds were detected.¹⁶ Thinking of these results, it seems the *Baridong chorten* was built on a prehistoric burial mound. The rather unusual wall that surrounds the *chorten* could have been part of mound’s burial chamber. We know from previous excavations from the Himalaya region¹⁷ that burial mounds similar to this often contained quite a lot of artefacts. Therefore, it might not be unlikely that the *Baridong mound* was excavated a long time ago, and later a *chorten* – maybe accommodating some of its grave goods¹⁸ – was erected on its remains. This *chorten* was damaged quite recently. The features of destruction clearly indicate that it became the target of looters, and the object(s) that were kept inside were taken.

In the end, this hypothesis is hard to prove. Nevertheless it is a sad alarm signal for Bhutan’s national cultural heritage! Up to now, cultural relics are morally protected by history and the religious belief of the local people. As soon as tradition is challenged by different concepts, these places are seriously endangered. The *Baridong* site is proof that this change is already happening.

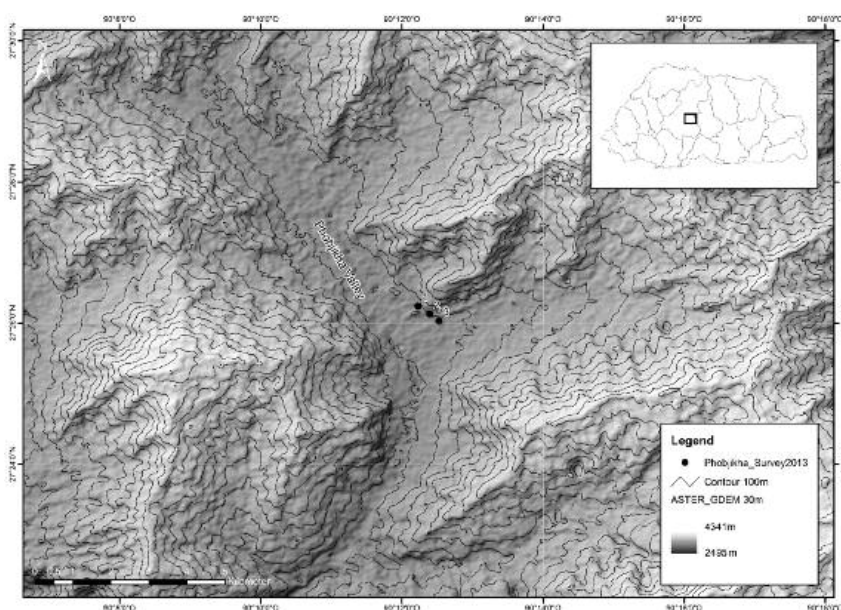
Bearing these aspects in mind, the urgency of installing another cultural heritage protection in Bhutan becomes even more obvious when discussing the results of the Phobjikha Valley survey below.

Bhutan’s Monumental Burial Mounds – Field Survey in the Phobjikha Valley

The documented burial mounds at *Kenchosum* in the Choekhor Valley and the *Baridong* site raised the author’s attention. Being aware of large burial mounds in the cen-

Fig. 11 Survey Map of the Phobjikha Valley
(Data source: ASTER GDEM – «ASTER is a product of METI and NASA»; <http://www.gadm.org>)

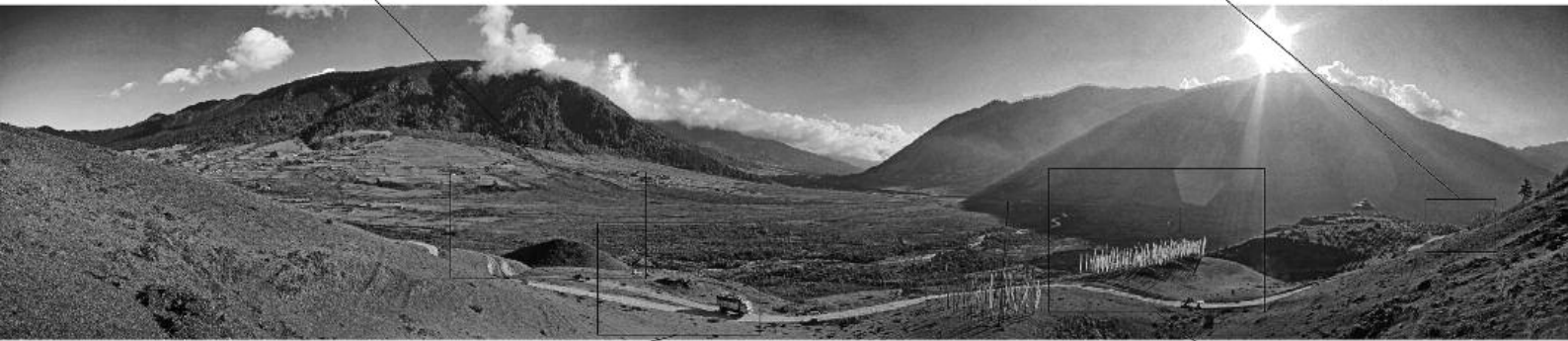
Fig. 12 Panoramic Image of the burial mounds in the Phobjikha Valley



¹⁶ See Della Casa, Fux, Diggelmann, Walser 2012.

¹⁷ Particularly Tibet.

¹⁸ It is known that spiritual objects or ‘treasures’ are kept in *chortens*.



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tral Tibetan highlands, mapped by Austrian archaeologists and dated back to the fourth to ninth centuries AD,¹⁹ and furthermore informed by Walter Roder – the former Country Director of Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation in Bhutan – about some non-natural looking mounds in the Phobjikha Valley, the authors decided to conduct a brief survey there (Fig. 11 and Fig. 12). What was immediately detected, exceeded all expectations:

No 1: Burial mound 1 (N 27,43731°; E 90,20381°; Alt. 2877 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

On a prominent hill ridge at the eastern slope of the valley, a large temple has recently been constructed. A large mound structure with a diameter of approximately 30 meters is located north of this temple site. The top of the mound is flattened (comparable with the Tibetan MT-A.2 burial mound type).²⁰ Both shape and localization clearly indicate its artificial character. In addition, decorated ceramic sherds were found on top of the mound during the field survey.

Group of three burial mounds (N 27,43544°; E 90,20658°; Alt. 2898 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

South of the newly built temple, three mound structures with a diameter of approximately five meters are arranged in a row from east to west. The area is covered with prayer flags. The structures seem to be untouched except for the damage caused by the flag poles. Yet, the small hills are clearly recognizable as artificial mound structures and are therefore endangered to be detected and looted.

¹⁹ Hazod 2013; <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/tibetantumulustradition/>.

²⁰ Hazod 2013; <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/tibetantumulustradition/sites/introduction-and-legend/>.



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Fig. 13 Time series of satellite images. Dashed circle marks «burial mound 1» – arrow indicates unknown archaeological structure on the hilltop. (Google Earth™ V 7.1.2.2041 – Phobjikha Valley, Wangdue Phodrang, Bhutan. Coordinates: 27°26'09.67» N 90°12'14.35» E, Eye altitude: 3.62 km. Date of imagery: A – 1/15/2000, B – 1/9/2006, C – 11/26/2011. Source of imagery: Digital Globe 2014.

Monumental mound at the creek (N 27,433847°, E 90,208769°, Alt. 2864 m.a.s.l.; WGS 84)

Just below the hill ridge next to the river, a monumental cone-shaped mound is situated. Its diameter is about forty meters, and its height approximately 15 meters. The authors argue about its artificial nature.

After comparing the field survey data with satellite imagery from the last 14 years using Google Earth™, it became obvious that the hilltop of *burial mound* 1 was removed sometime between January 2006 and November 2011 (Fig. 13). This can probably be associated with the construction work for the new temple nearby. It is also worth mentioning that most likely another artificial structure of unknown age and function was affected by the construction of the modern temple.

In and around the nearby settlement north of the temple area, further mound structures are obvious. It is clearly a site of very high cultural historic importance and needs to be protected immediately. If the author's first estimation is true, we deal with a prehistoric burial site of prime significance, not only on a national but also on international level. It has to be pointed out that burial mounds, particularly in such monumental dimensions, are hardly ever found in an untouched and complete state of conservation. A scientific examination of the site is highly desirable and will shed light on Bhutan's prehistory for the very first time in the country's archaeological research history. The fact that the largest burial mound has already been partially destroyed does indeed emphasise the vital importance to protect Bhutan's archaeological cultural heritage sites immediately!

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